

Up Close and Personal

By AT3 Paul Golden

It was nearing the end of my shift when a call came into the avionics shop that aircraft 503 needed an IFF receiver-transmitter (R/T) on the fly. I was in the shop at the time and wanted to respond as quickly as possible. It had been a busy day, and we still were fairly early into the deployment, my first one. My thought at the time was to be as productive and expeditious as possible, so I grabbed my float coat, cranial and tools.

After removing an R/T from another aircraft in the hangar, I double-timed to the flight deck. Although new to the carrier's flight deck, I was qualified to go up alone. I entered the flight deck from behind the island like I had been taught and headed directly for the aircraft. As I rounded an E-2 that was next to our bird, I saw the normal people: flight deck chief, plane captain, safety, and the troubleshooters. I looked to see where I needed to go and saw our shop's more experienced troubleshooter waiting for the part. This is where it got ugly.

Before arriving at my current squadron, I mostly had FA-18 experience, and there are two major differences in the location of the exhaust. The exhaust of the Hornet is all the way aft; the EA-6B's exhaust is roughly two-thirds of the way down the fuselage. Also, the EA-6B tailpipes focus exhaust down toward the ground, unlike the FA-18, which has tailpipes pointing exhaust directly behind the aircraft.

The key factor in my incident was that I did not take time to assess the situation. Any one with vision can see the difference in the location of the exhaust. My downfall was that I relied on prior habit patterns without taking the time to look around. The area in which the IFF R/T has to go is in the "birdcage," located between the two exhausts. There isn't too much I remember after going directly for the birdcage, except the troubleshooter pointing to the exhaust, which was no more than 3 feet to my right at head level.

From the blast of the exhaust, I was lifted off of my feet and blown aft and down. I landed on my side, still



Navy photo by PH3 Lance Mayhew Jr.

holding on to the R/T. The next thing I saw I'll never forget: my cranial with my glasses still inside it flying overboard, more than 20 feet from the deck edge. I landed with my boots up against the scupper, my hand ripped from the non-skid, and my ears on fire from being directly behind the exhaust without any hearing protection. The line shack LPO and an airman quickly grabbed and led me below decks to medical.

Once there, I received four stitches to my left hand and took some time to calm down. I was very lucky only to have needed stitches. It easily could have been me going overboard, along with my cranial, not to mention the possibility of losing the equipment I was carrying.

All in all, I believe my accident easily could have been avoided if I had spent more time studying my surroundings. I also should have maintained situational awareness. Just because we face an ever-present push to perform in a timely manner, it is not an excuse to develop a lax attitude. No one wants to see an accident occur because of poor decisions. ❖❖❖

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